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AUTHOR Valentine, Kristin; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Twenty-two interviews were conducted with the owner, managers, employees, suppliers, customers, and competitors of an auto dealership employing 91 people in order to examine the oral traditions of that company. The interviews provided data on management styles, dynamics of the managers' interaction, general language usage, paralanguage, favorable and unfavorable stories, cliches, self disclosures, company line versus individual expression, and organizational phrases. An analysis of the transcripted interviews and field notes indicated that the company (1) showed a bias for action; (2) was close to the customer; (3) valued autonomy and entrepreneurship; (4) believed in productivity through people; (5) had a hands-on, value driven management; (6) stuck to what it knew how to run; (7) believed in a lean staff; and (8) operated with autonomy and discipline. The interviews also revealed that the informants supported the stated company policy, which stresses customer service and organizational growth along with personal aspirations. (Interview questions are included as well as sample stories and anecdotes.) (HOD)

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UNDERSTANDING AN ORGANIZATION THROUGH ORAL TRADITIONS: "NO KINKS, SNAKES OR WHINERS NEED APPLY"

Kristin Valentine, Janet Jacobsen, Teresa Mont'Ros Mondoza

Department of Communication

Arizona State University

Western Speech Communication Association
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Understanding an Organization Through Oral Traditions

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Kristin Valentine, Janet Jacobsen, Teresa Mont'Ros Mendoza

Department of Communication

Arizona State University

Tempe, AZ 85287

(602) 965-3095

Abstract

Interpretive methodology is presented for collecting the oral traditions of a business organization. The researchers conducted twenty-two interviews with the owner, managers, employees, suppliers, customers and competitors of an auto dealership employing 91 people. An analysis of the transcripted interviews and field notes showed the informants, in their performance of the folkore of the company, supported the stated company policy which stresses customer service and organizational growth along with personal aspirations. This method provides a useful system for researchers interested in an intensive but short term evaluation of a corporate culture.

Understanding an Organization Through Oral Traditions:

"No Kinks, Snakes or Whiners Need Apply"

Is a company what it says it is? How does it know? How do its participants know? Of particular interest to communication researchers is a functional approach to the study of the creation and sustaining of social reality within an organization. The sales manager of a successful auto dealership in the Southwest tells each potential new salesperson some version of this admonition; it is good advice for a communication researcher as well:

> Let's get this straight, first off. I don't want anyone promising a customer anything we can't deliver. We don't play high-ball or low-ball games. You don't tell a customer, 'Oh, we can get you much more for your trade-in' or 'We can sell you this top-of-the-line car for much less than our competitors,' unless you know you can make good on those offers. We don't want kinks like that working here. And we don't want snakes either--you tell a customer an outright lie, that turns you into a snake and you're out -- like NOW. And one more thing -- I can't stand whiners. You've got a complaint? Then do something about it or grin and bear it. That's how things are run around here."

Increasingly, communication research is studying organizational patterns of enactment through the application of the interpretive paradigm. Within this view the self performs its own identity and, collectively, enacts its culture through roles and rituals expressed in oral traditions passed, often informally, from one cultural member to another. The telling (performing) of stories, jokes, histories, legends, anecdotes and even gossip reflects how the culture sees and expresses its relation to the world around it.

Current research in management indicates a shift of emphasis from managing and controlling to interpreting and knowing. Managers want to understand more about the process of creating, maintaining and renewing the culture of their organizations as a means for coordinating action. The study of a company's oral traditions can provide such knowledge because oral traditions operate both to reflect, like a mirror, the beliefs and attitudes of its performers, and to indicate, like a lamp, appropriate behaviors and beliefs (the code of conduct) to the listeners.

Definition of Terms

Culture.

Broadly defined, a culture is a "group that shares a language and has developed a sense of groupness of community" (Abrahams, 1983, 347). Culture is always dynamic, always in the process of formation and change, and is learned.

Organizational culture.

As a subset of larger cultures, organizational culture can be defined as "the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, E., 1984, 3).

"Organizational culture is not just another piece of the puzzle, it is the puzzle" (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983, 146).

Performance.

Says Hymes (1975, 18), "Performance is a cultural behavior for which a person (or persons) assumes responsibility for presentation to an audience.

This assumption of responsibility for presentation distinguishes performance from behavior (simply anything and everything that happens) and conduct (behavior under the aegis of social norms, cultural rules, shared principles of interpretability)."

Folklore.

Folklore is defined by United States public law as "traditional expressive culture shared within various groups, including occupational groups and includes a wide range of creative and symbolic forms such as language, drama, ritual. The expressions are learned, orally, by imitation or in performance and are maintained or perpetuated without formal instruction or institutional direction" (Public Law 94-201, 1976).

Purpose

Our purpose is to develop a methodology for determining the values and attitudes of individual companies/organizations, based on a collection and analysis of the oral traditions of the company as those oral tradition are communicated by those who interact both from the inside and the outside with the company. For researchers skilled in analyzing the communication of folklore data, this methodology can be used with variety of organizations. Heeding Smircich (1983), we are not seeking here to mold and shape the internal culture like "culture vultures" or to try to change culture consistent with managerial purposes. We are functioning as a mirror, not a lamp, and believe this methodology can help a company know whether they do, indeed, see the forest for the trees.

Related Scholarship

The study of stories in and about organizations is not entirely new (Browning, 1978; Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975; Roy, 1960), yet to date no clear methodology has emerged (Riley, 1983). One probable reason is the diverse

academic perspectives taken, including sociology (Roy, 1960), social psychology (Martin, 1982), management (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975; Meyer, 1982), administrative science (e.g. Martin et al., 1983, Riley, 1983) and communication (e.g. Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983; Faules, 1982; Browning, 1976).

Most published studies fail to include potentially valuable information, such as interview location, source of permission, questions asked, justification and examples given subject, or length of interview. Some studies are participant-observation (Roy, 1960; Smilowitz, 1982), with the author essentially presenting his own story. Others report "stories" gleaned primarily as an observer (Pettigrew, 1982; Vaughn, 1984). A number of researchers have used interviews taken within organizations as sources of stories (Brown, 1983; Martin et al., 1983; Riley, 1983). Some have combined questionnaires and stories from interviews (Albrecht & Ropp, 1982; Browning, 1978; Faules, 1982; Wilkins, 1979), and surveys, interviews, and field observations have been used together (Martin, 1982; Meyer, 1982). Martin et al. (1983) examined stories from interviews, academic literature, and published histories. There are also those who have advanced theories which urge the use of stories to understand organizations (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983; Putnam, 1982).

Organizational communication scholars are beginning to take advantage of ethnographically-related studies at the same time that oral tradition scholars are investigating folklore in modern complex societies. Roger Abrahams (1983) notes the folklorists have for some time observed and described the emerging lore of part-time social units and segments within complex societies and cultures. Who constitutes "folk" now includes any

group of people who share at least one common factor (Bauman, 1983). Dan Ben-Amos (1975), Robert Georges (1969) and Dell Hymes (1975) add the performance component. Conquergood (1983) describes human beings as performing creatures whose cultural performances include stories, legends, histories, gossip, ceremonies and rituals. This focus on the dynamic, changing, interrelated nature of folklore and performance is further explored at length in Toelken (1979). Although we recognize that some people take "folklore" to mean an exaggerated or untrue idea, in the context of this paper, oral traditions and folklore are used interchangeably.

The use of qualitative ethnographic methods--particularly the study of organizational stories--is now a much-touted approach to organizational research (i.e. Putnam, 1983; Albrecht & Ropp, 1982; Faules, 1982; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Strine & Pacanowsky, 1983). Yet studies to date provide little in generalizable conclusions, both from lack of consistent purpose, consistent methodology, and researchers trained in folklore collection and analysis. As Fine and Speer (1977, 375) point out, "Our contribution will be the result of our experience in creating, participating in, evaluating, and doing performance, experience which is not part of other disciplines currently interested in the nature of performance."

Limitations

Though participant-observation offers more depth to the collection and analysis of cultural stories, our purpose was to develop a methodology that could be used by non-participant observers who wish to help an organization analyze its oral traditions without the commitment of several years (or a lifetime) of direct involvement. We recognize that we three are outsiders to the business of the organization we chose to study; that our tape recorded and note taking sessions of interviewing were artificial to the daily oral

tradition activity, and that for good or ill we also become partially socialized into the system. We also know that our 22 interviews with 21 people from top management to clerks and customers were few in number in relation to the total number of people involved with the company. Nevertheless, we believe that this cross-sectional approach--in essense a "picture" of the company taken from many different perspectives--provides a useful tool for the analysis and understanding of organizations.

Methodology

The basic methodological approach can be divided into three phases; the original design, the application phase, and the actual analysis. Under the first phase, we established a set of criteria for companies we would be interested in approaching (located within reasonable distance of the University, both a product and a service department if possible, mid-sized, owner operated, and owned by a woman, to provide a balance of past research on male-owned companies). A list of several companies meeting the criteria was compiled. Categories of "interviewees" were designed to provide a cross-sectional perspective on the company: managers, employees (sales/office and service), competitors, customers, and suppliers, to provide insight both from those inside and outside but interacting with the company. The senior researcher compiled correlated lists of questions to be asked of participants in each category.

Sandra Bates, of Sandra, Inc. was the first company contacted. A letter of introduction, followed by a phone call to make an appointment, resulted in a meeting at Bates's office with the research team, at which time Bates expressed her interest in participating in the research. (The auto-dealership has 91 employees, and is a leader in the state in unit sales volume.) She was provided with a one-page outline of the project, a sample

letter to potential participants and the lists of questions to be asked. There was no offer on our part to adjust any of the questions, nor did the owner ask for any changes. Customers were selected randomly from a list of customers in all departments on August 11. Competitors were chosen randomly from those in direct product competition throughout the greater metropolitan area and those in general market competition in her immediate city. Suppliers were chosen from a list of those suggested by the comptroller and by the owner of Sandra, Inc. She also provided a letter of consent (explaining her involvement in the project to possible informants), and articles about the owner and the company, as well as in-house documents. Sandra also provided the organizational chart for her company, which is:

Randall Cooper (General Sales Manager) in charge of new and used products.

Fred Davis (Service Coordinator) in charge of service, and parts.

Joseph Hopkins (Comptroller) in charge of general office and personnel.

To minimize disruption of the company and to test the effectiveness of the method (short vs. long term), the interviews and analysis were completed in a six-week period.

Interview assignments were made on a grid, with the vertical row the participant categories and the horizontal row the three researchers. The names of actual persons to approach were filled in as the random selections were made. Three customers and suppliers were interviewed (one by each researcher; the owner was interviewed by the senior researcher; the top three managers were all interviewed (one by each researcher); and four competitors and four each in the two employee categories were interviewed. Employees were selected by random choice from the company staff list.

The application stage involved the actual approach to the participants. After the initial contact with the owner, the three researchers were invited to a regular weekly managers' meeting, where they were introduced to all managers and the research project was briefly explained. This meeting enabled us to compile our first field notes on management styles, dynamics of their interaction, general language usage, paralanguage, favorable and unfavorable stories, cliches, self disclosures, company line vs. individual expression, and organizational phrases. Following the meeting, each researcher set up appointments with the assigned manager, and then managers were approached to set appointments with the employees under them. One employee chose not to participate; though willing to answer questions, she did not want to be taped. The informants participated willingly and often expressed pleasure and enthusiasm for the opportunity to talk about the company.

Each participant was given, and signed, a consent form which detailed the purpose of the research and the promise of anonymity. The interviews were tape recorded and the interviewers also wrote up field notes in detail as soon as possible after each interview. We recorded as many details of conversations and non-verbal behaviors as possible. Because we were interfering with the normal business routine of the company, we restricted our interviews to an hour unless the informant was clearly comfortable with a longer session. Whenever possible we asked for metafolklore, that is, interpretations from the informants of the meaning of their stories.

During the interview process the three researchers met regularly to recount general details and key stories of each interview conducted since the previous meeting. At these meetings we shared the key points from field notes, including setting and non-verbal factors. This process provided the

team with stories and metaphors to pursue in upcoming interview ("I heard a story about X. What version, if any, of the story have you heard?"). These included, but were not limited to, "71 out of 80" and "How Sandra Got the Company." We focused on stories and the manner of telling the stories (incidents or events reported by informants as having happened to them or to someone else). The truth or falsity of the story was not an issue. If a person chose to tell us a particular story, the story was presumed true for that person and thus of value within the context.

For the analysis phase, following the completion of the interviews, three researchers met again and each went over the transcript of each of their own interviews, recounting for the other team members the stories told in that interview and the metaphors and dramatic imagery used, as well as the related paralanguage. Then the senior researcher, using oral traditions methods, organized the oral traditions into predominant patterns, which were reviewed by the other team members and distilled into as brief but thorough a form as possible. The final task was to check the organizational response to our results.

Results

We conducted 22 taped interviews with a total of 21 informants (the owner was taped both before and after the other interviews). The majority of the interviews were face to face dyads, generally conducted either in the company conference room or the office of the informant. Of the three customers interviewed two were interviewed by phone, one in a restaurant. The owner/manager was interviewed once in a restaurant (first interview), and once in her office (last interview). The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes, with 30 minutes being the shortest (Strasser) and 90 minutes being the longest (Bates).

From the transcripts and field notes we gathered all stories (with their variants) told two or more times. Because we guaranteed anonymity to the participants, we have grouped the anecdotes and stories. Though stories may be condensed, the actual words of the informants are unchanged except to provide pseudonyms for anonymity.

How the Company Got Started

Owner: My husband had the opportunity to come out and get involved in this business. We moved out here, myself with four preschool children, and once out here my husband decided he really didn't want to be in the marriage, went his way, and I had the opportunity to buy his position in the company. Vidal, the operating partner, said, "Hey, Sandra, would you be interested in going into this company?" and I said, "Yes, I would." I had already sold some stock in my father's company to finance my husband's interests and since my husband was gone, I chose to finance my own interests. Vidal and I went 50/50 partners. He was the operating general manager and President of the corporation, I was the Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer for ten years. In 1979, my partner retired because of ill health. I took over as General

Manager and 100% owner. I really didn't know what I wanted to name it. I talked to some other dealers and they said, "Why not use your own name? If it is not absentee ownership, if it is not a conglomerate, it personalizes it and it is so much more important." And that's how we got into the name Sandra, Inc. I'm proud of this place. My father designed the building.

Customer: The business used to belong to her father. One of their cars fell off a carrier truck at 50 mph and was smashed up. Vidal fixed it up and sold it as new. The lady who bought it eventually found out and sued. Vidal got out of it by giving the company to his daughter and changing the name.

Employee: Sandra just took over.

Employee: Sandra was a silent partner and bought Vidal out.

Competitor: I heard Sandra was Vidal's wife, or ex-wife, and got the company in a divorce.

Competitor: Sandra and her husband purchased the company from Vidal and when they got divorced, Sandra bought her husband out and then a while later Sandra bought Vidal out. That's my knowledge. I don't know how factual that it.

Employee: Vidal wanted to get the Company going but lumber was a problem so Sandra backed it with money.

Employee: Sandra moved, put up a couple of buildings and it just grew.

Supplier: Sandra was married to the son and they got divorced and she took over.

Friend of employee: Why would a man want to give his company a woman's name?

Previous Owner vs. Present Owner: "71 Out of 80 People Quit the Country Club"

Owner: We had between 70 and 75 employees when I took over. There asn't a mass walkout. We were never down. People said, "This is the way we've done it for ten years," and I said, "That's not the way it's going to work." My personality is very different from my predecessor. I love him dearly but he was patriarchial, he made all the decisions. If someone got fired, they'd go talk to him and if he didn't think they should be fired, they weren't. I want to manage only 5 or 6 people and let them manage the rest. The style was so drastically different that some quit. When I asked for ideas and suggestions, they didn't have any. They were order takers only.

Employee: When I used to work for Vidal and people asked where I worked and I told them they'd say "Oh" (here the voice goes down in circumflex pitch pattern) but when I say, Sandra, Inc., they say "I've seen her on TV," or I've heard good things about the service there."

Manager: No one quit when Sandra came on. There was a country club atmosphere that needed changing, which she did.

Employee: Quite a lot quit when Sandra took over, but there were still several here from Vidal when I started. That was about six months after Sandra took over.

Employee: I know definitely that 71 people left when Sandra came on because a friend of mine who worked here told me.

Employee: Yes, 71 out of 80 people left. The people at Vidal were "hard to hustle" people.

Who's Got the Monkey

At the managers' meeting attended by the researchers, the managers were discussing a problem and one put an envelope on another's shoulder and said, "Now you've got the monkey and you've got to take care of it."

Owner: I went to management seminar that they used the story. And the monkey story told so clearly the value of delegation as well as the importance of not having to make all the decisions yourself. The importance of hiring, selecting, training those people under you, at whatever level you are, to take those decisions as their own personal responsibility and to make those decisions and to bring only those few for input. So that kinda is an inside joke, because we share that back and forth, you know, who's got the monkey? And those are the monkeys we can pile on our own backs, or toss back and forth.

Manager: "Monkey, monkey, who's got the monkey?" Subordinates try to pass monkeys on up to superiors. But if the superior gives you a monkey you can't give it back to her unless you are very clever. "I'm going out of town in a few minutes" is about the only way. It's a hot cake. We used to call them alligators until we read the Harvard Business Review story (Oncken & Wass, 1974) and now we call them monkeys.

Individuals in the Company Stories

The High-D Personalities

Owner: High-D comes from some personality tests. I'm always using my people for guinea pigs, like the study that you guys are doin'. This one test, I don't remember the people, tested people for personality bags. One bag was creativity and another was D. High-D was dominant. All my managers fit into the High-D category and I see my function as trying to keep these High-D's from crashing and burning into each other. It marks the

entrepreneurial spirit. It became a term that we would use when we thought someone was comin' on too strong. "Hey--you're High-D is showin'." It's a piece of information that you need to be aware of and it keeps it from being a direct attack.

Manager: Everyone here has the long term in mind. Everyone expects to be here a long time and wants the company to do well. We are all High-D. For the people I hire, I give no latitude on punctuality or honesty.

"Half a Bubble Off" People

Employee: No one here is straight and conservative. We all do extra work when it is necessary. We solve the problems but we're all half a bubble off--you know, the bubble on a level? We sign, howl, hoot and we're a bit wild.

Employee: You have to be kind of crazy to work here.

"Snakes, Kinks and Whiners" Not Wanted

Manager: I don't want kinks or snakes working for me. Kinks make promises they can't deliver. They'll tell someone they can make some special deal so the customer shops around and when he comes back the kink will "discover" that he couldn't really offer that. Snakes outright lie, and I give no latitude on honesty. I don't like whiners either. "Oh, we're having a bad day," or "Oh, it's going to rain over the weekend." I say, go do something about it or grin and bear it.

Employee: One guy worked here for three years, and when Randall found out he was a snake, and told a lie--he got fired--that was it. He was out.

"Give Us the Rope" People

Manager: Sandra gave me the rope. I could run with it or hang myself.

Employee: Fred gives us free rein. He might later tell us he didn't like this or that and then we don't do it again but he stands up for us. For

example a guy came in and didn't want the oil changed. We always do that for a customer but the order not to do it didn't show up on the work order so we changed the oil. The customer refused to pay for it and the company ate the difference.

Is It Pride or an Ego Trip?

Manager: Sandra is inexhaustible; the managers add expertise. We are the best you can find.

Employee: This year they can possibly crack the top ten.

Employee: The company is proud of its sales record. I think we are 5th in the country in X category.

A wall poster in Bates's office proclaims "I don't need the essentials, it's the luxuries I can't live without."

Competitor: If I had my name up there like she does, it would only be an ego trip for me.

Competitor: She is very front and center (looking at the stationery which has her picture), obviously by her stationery.

Competitor: The name shows the pride of the owner, but they all think they're selling only the top of the line.

Competitor: They are a little snooty, very protective, everyone knows they think they are the biggest.

Competitor: Sandra is very successful but is a high roller--egotistical and hard to deal with.

Finding the Space Between Lean and Burnout

Owner: We are always looking for that little space between runnin' lean and burnin' out.

Runnin' Lean

Supplier: What kind of people work here? Well, busy, I don't see no dead bodies around here.

Employee: When I first came to work here, it was like boot camp, basic training--it was tough.

Employee: The managers say to us "Listen you guys, if there's a problem, let's head it off and discuss it NOW."

Supplier: The minute anything goes wrong, you're right there on the firing line and you get the bugs out of it. If you are committed to do something for her, you do it, otherwise you're dead.

Supplier: She's really number-oriented, like big business.

Manager and Sales Employee:

Manager: What would happen if you came in at 8:01.

Employee: I'd have the day off, right?

Manager: And what would happen if you came in at 8:01 the next day?

Employee: I'd get fired?

Manager: Right.

Preventing Burnout

Policy Manual: We will go on trying to provide personal security opportunity for growth, respect, and fair compensation for each individual's unique contribution to the success of the organization.

Employee: I like having Sunday off. One day a week and you don't think about selling, keeps you from burning out. The management is great. Randall really cares about us. He once let me stay home when I was having some personal problems and it wasn't that I wasn't making money for him but he called to find out how I was. "Stay home and get your head on straight," he said. He can solve problems. People can get furious but Randall comes out and in a little while they are laughing.

Employee: Once I answered the phone early in the morning and someone asked for Fred. I said abruptly, "Who is this?" Sandra said, calmly, "This is Sandra." Later Fred told me that Sandra had told him "Someone was rude on the phone this morning," but didn't say who it was. I was pretty sure I had said my name but appreciated how she handled that.

Analysis

We recognize that our informants were telling us what they wanted us to hear, thus either reinforcing their acceptance of the values of the company or covering up their non-acceptance. Each informant treated the interview as significant, based on their willingness to be interviewed, to answer questions fully, and their paralanguage and non-verbal behavior. Even those whose non-verbal behavior indicated a degree of caution in their answers proved to be rich sources of information when their interviews were analyzed overall.

The performed oral traditions uncovered by our research reveal four areas of information about the company: 1. expectations of behavior, 2. group morale, 3. visions of the past and future, and 4. external appraisals of the company.

Expectations of Behavior

Customer Service

Customer compliants are taken care of with urgency. If something is wrong, the manager or group gets right on it. Pressure is put on everyone to get things done right now. Sales tries to be sure the treatment of the customer is honest. Sandra says, "We want to make a good profit while still being honest and straightforward and there's a lot of kinky people in our business." Sales managers will fire people who either lie or misrepresent the product.

Organizational Growth

The folklore repeats the message that the Sandra, Inc. company is aggressive, innovative and well run. As to growth, there are repeated statements about the leadership being innovative, avant-garde, ready for new ideas from seminars and experiments and outside forces, and ready to monetarily reward new ideas from within the company. The "Who's got the monkey?" story epitomizes the frequently repeated philosophy of the owner to manager only a few people and give them responsibility for managing the affairs of the company and its people under their aegis.

Personal Aspirations

To a person, the informants expressed their belief that career ladders were, in fact, in place for them. A sense of responsibility for the job, even if it meant extra hours, was rewarded by a sense of being appreciated as a person, and not just as a producer. We project that individual differences not resulting in higher profit for the department would not be tolerated. As one informant said, "Money is the bottom line" and each is aware of his or her part in that effort.

Group Morale.

The people inside the company express a belief that they are a team, a family. They believe management genuinely cares about them as people. Their team approach to the auto repair work that is part of this company may not, they say, work for others but works for them and each supports it with enthusiasm. Our assumption is that those who do not support the team approach would likely move out of the company.

Employees would like to have more personal appraisals of their efforts, beside the more obvious "Employee of the Year" awards. They felt they needed to know more formally as they went along how their work was perceived. Some

people external to the company regarded the obvious pride of the employees of Sandra, Inc. as egotistical. What one person saw as pride, another saw as boastful behavior.

Visions of the Past and Future

The stories of how the company got started seemed to reflect a widely held notion that Sandra could not have been owner of such a large business by herself but had gotten it by default through marriage, divorce, or blood ties. Sandra's version of the takeover of the company has many rivals.

As a manager, Bates describes herself in terms of her actions. She believes she is perceived as hard working, if somewhat distant. She believes the managers respect her and are impressed with the organization she has built. Our informants were aware of her ability to change the company into one of the top money makers in the area and at the same time understand the needs of the people around her. Frequently mentioned was her willingness to delegate because she knew the staff would carry out her plans.

Organizational Response

In the concluding interview with Sandra Bates, she said of our findings: "You guys did a great job. It sure was a lot of work. The only question I have is on the statement about the incongruity. (p. 23). I don't see an incongruity between helpin' folks out, lookin' out for them and performance."

The researcher explained that the message "We take care of our employees" might be understood to mean, instead, "We take care of our employees as long as they are more and more productive and cost effective." Her answer was in terms of geometric metaphor: "I see a continuum on a line between the "'Let's hire our friends and all have a good time' folks at one end of the line and the 'Run 'em through, use 'em up and then get new ones' at the other end of the line."

It was the word "incongruity" that seemed inappropriate to Sandra Bates. She could not see any discrepancy between a policy that put profit-making in the same category as people-care.

When the researcher asked if she had planned any changes in the organization as a result of the analysis of results, she said, emphatically: "Yes, I am working with our Ad agency to do some spots on how long we have been in business here and how my company got started. We need to clear up some of those misconceptions about how we got started." Her reactions indicated that she was both amused and chagrined about the stories attributing her owning of the business to accidents of marriage and blood ties.

Implications

One implication of this study is support for Wilkin's hypothesis (1979) that stories about an organization which are interpreted in terms of the management philosophy and which are the basis for a claim of organizational uniqueness were positively associated with commitment to the company.

A second implication is confirmation for the Peters and Waterman (1982) list of characteristics of a successful company. The oral traditions of Sandra, Inc. indicate that the company: (a) shows a bias for action; (b) is close to the customer; (c) values autonomy and entrepreneurship; (d) believes in productivity through people; (e) has a hands-on, value driven management; (f) sticks to what is knows how to run; (g) believes in a lean staff; and (h) operates with autonomy and discipline. The company is a leader in the state in unit sales volume and reflects these characteristics listed in In Search of Excellence (1982).

A third implication is that the employees apparently deal successfully with what would appear to be an incongruity. On the one hand, the company

projects an image of providing personal security and valuing each individual's unique contribution, yet in practice the company values performance over personality. This contradicts the Schein & Diamante study (1984, August) which urged organizations to examine the congruency between the actual internal culture and the image that a company projects because dissonance between the two could lead to job dissatisfaction, turnover, and general confusion over work expectation. Yet the employees of Sandra, Inc. express job satisfaction, tend to stay with the company for long periods of time, and have clear expectations of their work demands.

In the future, we would like to conduct a longitudinal study of Sandra, Inc. and monitor its oral traditions over several years. We would also like to compare the oral traditions of this particular company with others in its same product category. Further, we would like to compare the oral traditions of Sandra, Inc., which was unsuccessful and is now successful, with companies who: (a) were successful and are now unsuccessful; (b) were successful and are still successful; and (c) were unsuccessful and are still unsuccessful.

We need to study a wide range of organizations using the suggested methodology of this paper to determine the utility of the concept of organizational culture and to relate these cultural variables to other variables. Refined and adapted to specific circumstances, the method we have developed is an educational, economic and usable managerial tool.

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INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/1 of 5

QUESTIONS FOR OWNERS/MANAGERS

1. How did you come to head up this company?
2. a) How would you describe the working conditions here?
   b) How do you describe the working conditions to your friends? family?
   c) What is the first/last thing you do at work? others do?
3. How did this company get started?
4. a) What makes this company unique?
   b) How is this company unlike any others? Like any others?
5. a) How do things really get done around here?
   b) How did you find out how things really get done?
6. What kind of people like to work here? Don't like to work here?
7. a) When you tell people what you do (where you work), what do they usually say?
   b) How do you feel about that?
   c) What do you generally say in response?
8. a) How does the company reward its employees?
   b) How do you feel about that reward?
9. a) What have you accomplished recently that you are proud of?
   b) What has the company accomplished recently that it's proud of?
10. a) What plans does the company have for the next six months?
    b) How does that fit in with the rest of the competition?
    c) What is your part going to be in these plans?
11. a) What do you expect of the people you hire?
    b) What do you tell them in orientation?
12. I've heard "X" story about this company, is that how you heard it?(story, joke, etc.) How do you feel about "X" story?
13. Tell me more about (pick one or more of the suggested topics and indicate a story, joke, etc. . . . .)
    - Do you think this really happened?
    - How did it really happen?
    - How did others react to this? How did you react to this?
    - What happened then?
    - What's your interpretation of this situation?
    - What else happened that is like this situation?
    - What does this tell you about this company?
14. Who is the best storyteller around here?

QUESTIONS FOR SALES FORCE, SECRETARIAL, SHOP, ETC.

1. How did you come to work in this company?
2. a) How would you describe the working conditions here?
   b) How would you describe the working conditions to your friends? family?
   c) What is the first/last thing you do at work? others do?
3. How did this company get started?
4. a) What makes this company unique?
   b) How is this company unlike any others? Like any others?
5. a) How do things really get done around here?
   b) How did you find out how things really get done?
6. What kind of people like to work here? don't like to work here?
7. a) When you tell people where you work, what do they usually say?
   b) How do you feel about that?
   c) What do you generally say in response?
8. a) How does the company reward its employees?
   b) How do you feel about that?
9. a) What have you accomplished recently that you are proud of?
   b) What has the company accomplished that it's proud of?
10. a) What plans does the company have for the next six months?
    b) How does that fit in with the rest of the competition?
11. a) What is expected of you in this company?
    b) What are you told in orientation?
12. I've heard "X" story about this company, is that how you heard it? (story, joke, etc.) How do you feel about "X" story?
13. Tell me more about (pick one or more of the suggested topics and indicate a story, joke, etc.).....
    - Do you think this really happened?
    - How did it really happen?
    - How did others react to this? How did you react to this?
    - What happened then?
    - What's your interpretation of this situation?
    - What else happened that is like this situation?
    - What does this tell you about this company?
14. Who is the best storyteller around here?

QUESTIONS FOR CUSTOMERS

1. How did you come to do business here?
2. a) Who did you deal with?

   b) What did you go there for?
3. How did this company get started?
4. a) What makes this company unique?

   b) How is this company unlike any others? Like any others?
5. What kind of people seem to be working there? don't seem to be working here?
6. a) When you tell people that you do business at _____, what do they say?

   b) How do you feel about that?
7. What has the company accomplished that they seem to be proud of?
8. What plans does the company seem to have for the next six months?

QUESTIONS FOR COMPETITORS

1. What do you know about _____ company?
2. a) How would you describe the working conditions there?

   b) What is the first/last thing peple in this business normally do?
3. How did _____ company get started?
4. a) What makes _____ company unique?

   b) What makes _____ company unlike others? Like others?
5. a) How do things seem to really get done at _____ company? (if you do business with them)

   b) How did you find out?
6. a) What kind of people seem to like to work there?

   b) What kind of people don't seem to like to work there?
7. a) How does ____ company reward its employees?

   b) How does this company reward its employees?
8. What has ____ company accomplished that it seems to be proud of?
9. a) What do you think ____ company's plans are for the next six months?

   b) How does this affect the competition?
10. How do you think ___ company describes itself?
11. How would you describe ____ company?

ARIZONA STATE
UNIVERSITY TEMPE, ARIZONA 85287

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION (602) 965-5085

TO: Sandra Bates; President and General Manager, Sandra, Inc.

FROM:

DATE: 14 August 1984

SUBJECT: PROPOSAL TO COLLECT AND ANALYZE ORAL TRADITIONS OF SANDRA, INC. (15 August to 15 September, 1984)

PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS: Stories, anecdotes and jokes reflect how an organization is perceived by individuals and are therefore a part of the organizational life of a company. We propose a month-long study of oral traditions by and about your company.

BENEFIT FOR SANDRA, INC.: Oral traditions can serve as an index to the health of a company. There is a positive correlation between the success of a company and the positive ideas about the company that are reflected in its oral traditions. (See Search for Excellence, Corporate Cultures, and Interpretative Approaches to Organization Communication.)

COST: There is no monetary cost to the company. Researchers are donating their time.

PROCEDURE:
(1) Examine written company history, current advertising, training materials and customer mailings.
(2) Conduct tape-recorded interviews eliciting stories, anecdotes, and jokes told by and about the company. At interviewee convenience, interviews will be held with:

Sandra Bates	Suppliers
Managers	Competitors
Sales employees	Customers
Shop employees	

(3) Analyze the oral traditions for consistent themes and significant variations.
(4) Present analysis to Sandra Bates and interviewees for corroboration.
(5) Write up the project for academic communication journal and/or conference, providing copy for the company.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Anonymity for the company and interviewees is guaranteed. Pseudonyms will be used in all cases.

ATTACHMENTS: Samples of interview questions, narrator agreement form, and letter to potential interviewees.

mm

APPENDIX B: PERMISSION LETTER FROM OWNER

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to acknowledge that my company is cooperating in an academic study of corporate culture with :

This research requires interviews with a cross-section of people who interact in an with the company, and we urge your participation.

Sincerely,

President and General Manager

APPENDIX C: Sample Letter for Potential Interviewee

ARIZONA STATE
UNIVERSITY TEMPE, ARIZONA 85287
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

September 27, 1984

SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR INTERVIEW

We request your help in a research project we are conducting about organizations. We are investigating how the values of a company are communicated to help us understand more clearly what a company is.

Our study includes interviews with managers, employees, customers, suppliers and competitors of Sandra, Inc. We have randomly selected names in each of these categories. In all cases the information will be combined and the identities of participants will be kept confidential. Sandra Bates, the owner of Sandra, Inc., is cooperating with us, and if you wish, we will provide you with her letter of consent.

May we tape an interview with you in the next week about your experiences with Sandra Inc.? We expect the interview to take less than one hour. We will call to arrange a suitable time and place. We look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (5 PAGES)

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

1. Before the interview, test the tape and tape level by recording opening statement about informant, place, date, self.

2. Repeat above with mike and informant in place:
"This is (date and time) and (researcher) is talking with (informant's name), (title) in (place of interview) located at (address). We are going to talk about his/her experiences in working for this company. This is (interview number; tape number; side (a or b))."
3. Look at informant and say, "okay, let's get started."

4. Ask Name, association with company being studied, length of time with company, length of association with this type of work, age by decade.

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UNIVERSITY TEMPE, ARIZONA 85287
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION (602) 965-6085

NARRATOR AGREEMENT FORM

I give permission to

to use any interviews (audio or written) of me for their scholarly activities at Arizona State University. These scholarly activities consist of description and analysis of oral traditions (stories, anecdotes, jokes) in an organizational setting.

I understand that my anonymity will be assured in all written or oral discussions or writings that may occur with the interview material. I understand that a pseudonym will be used for each interviewee and organization that is named in the scholarly study.

Signature of Interviewee printed name date

Signature of Researcher printed name date

Association with company _____

Length of association with this type of work _____

Age by decade _____